

A Day in the Life of a Child Life Specialist

It's 9:30 on a Tuesday morning at Riley Hospital for Children at IU Health. Certified Child Life Specialist Bethany Russell has already attended rounds with the medical team in the 8 East wing of the Simon Family Tower when she enters the room of 5-year-old Faith Carver.

"Hi Faith! What are we doing?" Bethany's voice is warm and soft as she talks with Faith, who responds not with words, but with signs and sounds. "Oh, are we sad today?" Bethany asks. "Some days are hard, and that's okay."

Bethany helps Faith play "doctor" with a plastic medical kit and a doll. "Sometimes kids will want to give lots of shots. It's important to provide them control," Bethany explains. "They can't say no to doctors or nurses – they can say no to us."

Next, Bethany heads down the hallway to help a hospital volunteer get settled rocking a baby girl. "She is alone here a lot, so even if she is sleeping, it will be good for her to be held," Bethany explains.

At any moment, Bethany's pager could go off, with a request for help calming a child during an IV insertion or other procedure. For now, Bethany stops in the room of a fussy baby boy with multiple medical issues.

"You're doing a great job," Bethany tells the exhausted mother. "And you truly love him. This is a lot. This is a lot." She offers some gentle advice about calming him, then moves on to the next patient.

The need is great for more Child Life Specialists, and staff members like Bethany are hopeful that continued donor support will help Riley increase the size of the team.

"I love the mental challenge of meeting each child's needs," Bethany says. "With 25 patients on this floor, there is a lot of work to do. But no matter the number of challenges, I go home each day knowing that I've done good today, and that I'll come back tomorrow to do more good."



Child Life specialist Bethany Russell works with Faith Carver of Beech Grove

Medical Benefits of Child Life

Radiologists at Riley Hospital for Children now involve Child Life Specialists on a routine basis, before and during procedures. "Decreasing anxiety decreases the threshold and perception of pain in children," explains Boaz Karmazyn, M.D. "This enables the child to collaborate with the radiology tech and radiologist."

For some children, the support of Child Life Specialists is so helpful the medical team is able to perform a PICC line placement without general anesthesia or sedation. Dr. Karmazyn says there have been a few cases where Child Life support has enabled his team to perform urgent procedures immediately, instead of waiting hours to prepare for a patient to be sedated.

"Taking care of children includes not only providing accurate diagnosis and treatment," explains Dr. Karmazyn. "It also includes decreasing pain and anxiety for the child and family."

Hope Parker



Hope Parker of Greenwood with her mother, Jennifer

Watching 5-year-old Hope Parker play on a playground, it's hard to believe she has only half a heart. Her huge smile shows no sign of the pain she endured during 16 surgeries. "Hope is a real spitfire," says her mother, Jennifer Parker of Greenwood. "She's fun. She loves life. She's taught us a lot about what life really means."

Hope was born with a rare condition called hypoplastic left heart syndrome. Riley's Child Life staff has been a critical part of brightening Hope's many hospital stays. Jennifer says on one especially hard day, Hope lit up while participating in music therapy.

"It just provided that entertainment for her – something happy. She had chest tubes and was very uncomfortable," says Jennifer. "When you're stuck, to take her mind somewhere else was a gift."

Jennifer was also thrilled that the Child Life staff reached out to Hope's four siblings. "It was tough on her siblings to see her in the ICU, paralyzed and sedated. Child Life added the element of a little bit of fun. I never realized how important that was until we were in that situation."

Thanks to donations, Child Life and Creative Arts Therapies at Riley are reaching more children

- NICU now has its own Child Life Specialist
- Teen activities have increased to three times per week
- Urology patients get pre-surgery help
- Radiology patients now receive support
- Weekend and evening coverage has been added

With more support, Child Life could:

- Provide one Child Life Specialist for every 15 patients, instead of current 1:22 ratio
- Expand coverage in PICU, Radiology and Emergency Department
- Add another Child Life Specialist to day surgery, where patients are expected to quadruple

Dance and Movement Therapy Expands

More Riley patients now benefit from dance and movement therapy. Thanks to grants from Women for Riley and the Andréa Rizzo Foundation, dance and movement therapist Heidi Fledderjohm has tripled her time at Riley.

"Are you in? Come on, let me feel your strength," Heidi coaxes Indianapolis seventh grader Maddy Justice during a session in her hospital room. Heidi lets out a big whoop of approval. "Nice work!" Maddy has acute myeloid leukemia. Some days, she doesn't feel up to dance therapy. But this is a good day. Heidi teaches Maddy to hold up her father, Tim, as he leans far forward in a yoga pose, standing on just one foot. "My goal was to give you a sense of your own strengths and your own limits," explains Heidi. Since every patient is so different, her "bag of tricks" includes everything from martial arts, to West African Dance, to line dancing.

"It was heartwarming," says Tim. He wishes everyone who donates to Creative Arts Therapies could see how much they are helping kids like Maddy. For donors, Maddy has this message: "Thank you so much! It makes me relax and not think about where I am."



Maddy Justice (center) with her father, Tim (left), and Riley dance and movement therapist Heidi Fledderjohm